

ACROSS THE SEA



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Summary:

Eleven doesn't know anything of the world. She doesn't know there is space beyond the walls of the lab, doesn't know there is more to life than experiments, Papa, and the bath.

Other people know too much of the world, have lived too long... have known more than one life. Across the sea, the Asset that was once James Buchanan Barnes opens his eyes for a mission.

1. Prologue

Author's Note:

If you're concerned about triggers, feel free to message me (I'm the author) on [my tumblr](#) to ask!



The world is dark, stretching out in all directions like an endless sea of fine tar. A small girl, clad in just the thinnest of materials and a tan vest over her small frame, walks through the never ending sea. The ground is like water, but does not feel wet. The air is cold, but does not burn the lungs. She is nervous; it is her first time in this dark place.

In the distance--neither here, nor there; neither close, nor far (there is no distance in this place, as how can we measure endlessness?)--a beast moves. Leather skinned and armed with jaws of small razors, it sees the girl, considers her for a moment, and then moves on. It does

not know why it is here, does not know how it has found this connection between worlds. Has it always had access to what lay above?

In the distance, an anguished shout carries across the watered surface. Like a rock skipping on a lake, it bounces to the girl and then continues on. She perks her ear, listening. But the noise is gone. The girl keeps walking, looking.

2. The Asset

The first time Papa brought Eleven to the bath, she failed. Unused to the lack of connection to her world, she panicked and ruined her Papa's plans. This meant she was dragged down the hallway by technicians as she screamed for her Papa. She was put in isolation, the most horrible experience her young mind knew. It was also the most horrible thing anyone could experience.

Since then, Eleven has fought against being put in the isolation cell. She knew, from the look on Papa's face when he had seen her kill the technicians rather than be locked away, that something fundamental had changed. Brenner didn't ask her to kill a cat again. She knows she passed whatever test was being issued, that she pleased Papa. So now they are back at the tank to try again.

Eleven, named for the number scratched into her skin with ink, doesn't know why this is her life. To the best of her knowledge, this is how everyone lives. She wonders what is expected of her as the (new) technicians put on the net of wires and the helmet which allows her to breath inside the bath. She doesn't know how this technology works, too separate from the world to know much of science or theory. She only knows that each day, something new will be expected of her.

The machine lowers her into the tank, water crawling up from her feet to her knees to her stomach to her neck. She hates the last moment before her head is underwater, the transition from being in the world to separate from it. Once submerged, she can see through the glass and spot her Papa on the other side. He smiles in his clinical way, his eyes always the same. Then he reaches forwards and slides the cover around the tank shut, throwing Eleven into darkness. She is truly alone.

This is Eleven's second time in the dark world. She is nervous, but at least she now knows what to expect. She had been shown a picture before entering the space, a "bad man" Papa had told her. She pictures him now, the grainy black and white photograph. He was wearing a fur hat, upturned at the edges and perched on the crown of his head. Papa said he is Russian.

Eleven turns, seeing more black and more depth, and then there the Russian is. She gasps, a small intake of breath. The fluidity with which he exists in this space is surprising. Eleven, she is *here* , but he is a phenomena, floating and unaware he is in the dark world.

Eleven approaches him, knowing she is supposed to listen to his conversation. She comes within range, his voice fading in like someone dialing the volume higher on a television. He is speaking another language though, words thick on his tongue. How is she going to tell Papa what he says?

Behind him, movement catches Eleven's eye. She side steps, curious and nervous; she has never seen someone in the dark world she did not come here for. Last time, she had found a simple woman Papa had instructed her to, and this time it was the foreign man. Who else could be here? Why?

The man is moving, holding something long and shiny in his arms. Eleven moves closer, nervous he will detect her. He seems aware, like he could snatch a fly from the air, grasping it by the tips of its wings with ease. She is scared of his overwhelming presence. He carries himself like something deadly, a predator. And despite the fact that Eleven knows he is not physically here, she doesn't want to be his prey.

She moves to leave, content to remain hidden in the dark world, unrevealed to this dark man. He shifts his body, raising the long item in his arms to point one end into the void, at something in his presence in the real world. She sees his arm, a bicep of silver metal with a red star branded into the plates. The red, reflected on the watered ground, is the only two specs of color in this space.

Eleven walks away.

To the best of his knowledge, the Asset is making his first hit of the decade. He hasn't heard music like this leaking through the speakers before. The driver, just his head visible through the slit of a window between the cab of the truck and the cargo area, is bobbing his head to the beat. The Asset's handler is not charmed by the bouncing music; his foot is tapping and his eyes flick to the cab as they narrow.

"How long?" the handler asks harshly in Russian.

"Five," the driver says.

The Asset, usually stock still, rubs the thumb of his left metal hand along the strap of the equipment bag at his feet. Soon, he will get to pull a trigger again. He tips his head back, resting the crown against the cold metal of the van. Without realizing it, he closes his eyes behind the tinted tactical goggles and pictures a dark space. It is an endless void. The image calms him.

"Arriving in two."

The Asset opens his eyes, rises from his seat, and crouches in front of the back doors of the vehicle. His handler puts a hand on his shoulder. "You get in, you set the timer, and then you get out. Extraction is at Thirtieth and Brocken."

The Asset nods and grips the bag of equipment. He will have just three minutes to make his escape from the embassy before the bomb will go off. These 180 seconds will be the most dangerous for him.

"Drop zone in five, four, three, two..."

The Asset's handler pulls open the doors and the Asset jumps out of the van. His thick boots hit the ground with a thump, gravel grinding under the soles. The van door shuts behind him and the vehicle beelines for other end of the alley, then turns out of sight.

The Asset is four blocks from his target. He grabs the nearest fire escape and begins scaling to the rooftops. He is silent, an owl swooping down on its prey; there is no way to know he is coming.

The Asset easily jumps between buildings, just a quick, dark blur to those below. He is easily mistaken for a bird passing overhead, or

line laundry blowing in the wind. He arrives at the embassy undetected, landing on the roof with just the balls of his feet. As told, there is a large air conditioning vent on the roof. The Asset focuses on this, rather than the obvious door through which the maintenance people have roof access. He is not normal people.

A quick kick with his combat boot breaks the screws holding the vent cover in place. The Asset quickly checks for sensors or lasers, but it appears the embassy doesn't suspect rooftop visitors, or lacks the technology the Asset has grown used to thwarting in recent decades. He swings inside, bracing legs and arms against the walls of the shaft to begin his descent. He lowers himself quickly yet carefully from floor 35 to 27, before coming to a stop in the cold passageway to listen. There is no sign of life, so he swings his body and kicks with both his feet into the room. The vent clangs, potentially alerting someone to his presence. He catches the loose cover as he rolls onto the patterned carpeting, before more noise is made. The Asset freezes, listening for security. Voices in the hall speculate, but the door knob remains frozen.

As predicted, the Asset has entered a large meeting room. He is crouched to the side of a long maple table, eyes cranked to the side to watch the dramatic double doors. It is dark, but his eyes see fine in the dim light. The Asset sets the vent cover to the side and crawls forwards to slide under the table, removing the explosive from his bag. He pushes three buttons and is rewarded with a tiny beep. The Asset nods to himself and secures the explosive to the bottom of the table, directly beneath the central vase of flowers.

Three minutes. The Asset hurries, silent as ever, and backs into the air vent. From this spot on the floor, receding into the duct work, he can see the explosive's light flickering as it counts.

In the air vent, the Asset uses all his muscles to ascend back to the rooftop. By the time he reaches the 35th floor, his arms and legs are trembling. Just one minute to clear the city block. He knows there is not time for rest, and runs to the edge of the roof. He leaps to the next nearest building, two floors shorter, and hits the cement hard. He rolls to ease the impact and arrives on his feet, continuing to run from the imminent explosion.

The Asset is two more buildings away when the explosion rocks the city. The noise is loud, but not deafening. Screams follow, and the Asset knows he has forty seconds before the city police helicopter will be overhead.

At the next roof edge, he spots a fire escape and hurries back to street level. Here, he must use alleys and shadows to his advantage. He is still three blocks from the extraction point.

The Asset, normally forbidden from removing tactical gear while on a mission, knows the items will draw attention on the frenzied streets. He undoes the buckle holding the muzzle over his mouth and pushes the goggles up and off his face. Both are stowed in the tactical bag and he continues his travels.

No one notices him briskly walking down the street when the city has been hit by chaos. His head ducked and his eyes down, he makes it to the extraction point. He glances about and spots a sleek black sports car. The license plate reads “nine” and he knows it’s his ride. The Asset approaches, crossing two traffic lanes without looking, and slides into the backseat.

The driver glances in the rearview mirror and makes eye contact, affirming the Asset has entered, and then they depart from the curb.

Notes for the Chapter:

Remember to leave comments and/or kudos if you're enjoying the story!

3. The American

When Eleven's door opens, she hopes it is breakfast. She doesn't want to use the bath today or be faced with a spitting cat, or any other task Papa could ask of her.

However, at the door is Papa and she thinks that today he will ask something of her. As they leave her room, she glances at the ceiling. She is nervous about the world outside of her room today. Last night, after she had left the bath and failed to eavesdrop on the Russian man, she had resided in her room, looking at her crayon drawing of her and Papa on the wall when the lights had flashed. Eleven had frozen, staring at the twinkling bulbs. This had continued on and off for some time, sending her in and out of pure darkness to fluorescent lighting. A knot of unease had settled into the pit of her stomach.

Today, they return to the room with the bath together, and this time there are more people.

"Don't worry about them," Papa tells Eleven. "They are here to watch, to see all that you can do."

Eleven is nervous. New people don't come here. The technicians have been the same since the first day she can remember with Papa, and he is the only person who speaks to her. Ever.

They arrive at the bottom of the steps to the bath, the metal stairway that leads her to the top of the cylinder. She takes them slowly, leaving Papa at the bottom. He leaves to speak to some of the new men in the room. Eleven meets the technicians at the top, who put on the wires and underwater helmet.

They lower her into the tank, entering the water perfectly temperate to her skin. Once she is completely below the surface, they slide the cover over the bath's glass shut and she is in darkness. Now, Eleven enters the dark world.

The ground is covered in a thin layer of water, but she cannot feel it on her bare feet. The air is still, but isn't stagnant. There is no light, but she can see.

And Eleven sees a horror scene. Before her is the Russian, a person who is undeniably a technician at his side. Lab coat, gloves, the dead eyes; she would know a technician anywhere.

They are speaking another language, and Eleven listens for a moment. Then, a noise sounds from behind them and they turn. Eleven follows their gazes to see a man in tactical gear enter the room. His hair is to his shoulders, unkempt. It is the same man she saw the last time she came here for the Russian. His eyes are bright, but there is something lacking in them, like a person half asleep. He is huge, muscular and bulky to an extent that intimidates Eleven. Although Papa is tall, she has never seen someone with shoulders quite so wide.

There is another technician walking on the opposite side of him. The techs are tense, eyeing the unkempt man between them with apprehension. Eleven grows nervous. There is a foreboding note to the space, permeated through how people talk and walk and move. The technicians lead the man to a chair, materialized in the dark world without anyone noticing. It is a chair of horrors, with an arm sitting high in the air weaponized with instruments of the most threatening nature. Somehow, they glint forebodingly even in the dark world.

The man falls into the chair, like he wants to resist but his bones give out in order for his body to bend into the seated position. He shifts, sitting rigidly on the metal seat, staring straight ahead. The Russian and the first technician move closer, still speaking to one another. They regard this entire scene with an air of disconnect. Their tones are light, like they are talking about the weather. Meanwhile, Eleven's short, buzzed hair is on end.



One of the technicians who had led the man into the room holds a piece of rubber out to him at face level. The man leans forwards and takes the rubber into his mouth, a bite guard. He eyes the technician, apprehensive and waiting. His obedience in the face of his fear is astounding. Eleven doesn't know if she wants to see what happens next.

The instrument on the arm lowers towards the man's head. Meanwhile, the Russian continues his conversation, watching the scene before him with a clinical nature. The unkempt man pants, his chest heaving up and down, and when the arm is level with his face, Eleven looks away and he screams. It's an echoing yell, a shout of pure pain. Eleven thinks she may have heard it before, like it haunts her. She matches his scream, cowering.

Eleven opens her eyes and she is in the bath, not the dark world. She screams in the water, scared. What had just happened to the man?

The cover of the tank opens and Eleven sees Papa. The swing raises from the tank and she is brought into an awaiting towel from a technician. She eyes the tank as it is draped around her shoulders. She doesn't like what she had seen.

Eleven spends the afternoon thinking about the man in the chair.

What had they done to him? How could something hurt so badly? The noise he had made was terrible. It plays on loop in her mind as she lays on her bed, staring at the ceiling. Papa will be back, disappointed in her she is sure, and she is not ready for when he returns.

The Asset is pulled from the chair, weight too heavy for his own legs for a moment. His knees hit the floor before he catches himself, throwing a hand down to stop his fall. He takes a moment to breath, the technicians impatiently waiting.

“ *Get up .*” The Asset rises, knowing a command from his handler is non negotiable.

The Asset follows the technicians, knees like jelly, head like a thick, London fog. It’s a fog tainted with chemicals and things that go bump in the night.

The technician on his right stops at a door in the cement hallway, a dark space many levels beneath the ground. The door opens with a thick clank of the latch and the Asset enters despite his reservations. He has been here before: this means he is not being put on ice.

The door closes with a resounding clank and the Asset sinks to the floor. He doesn’t know how many days he will be here. The cell is dark, almost pitch black save for the light creeping under the door from the hallway. The Asset hates nothing more than these long, cold, dark days alone. He feels around and finds the low cot at the back of the cell. He crawls onto the cot and curls onto his side to await his brain to clear and the next mission to be issued.

The next time Papa asks Eleven to enter the dark world and spy on the Russian, she knows she will see the man from the chair. It is an inevitable truth, something she can feel in her bones. She closes her eyes in the tank as the cover is slid over the glass, taking Papa from view, and she readies to see the man tortured again.

When she opens them, she is in the dark world. It is dead silent, just dark and faintly lit, reflections barely existing on the water's surface. Eleven turns slowly, searching.

And then she sees him. It's not the Russian (not the man she is supposed to be looking for), but the man from the chair. She knows she is failing, that this will not please Papa, but she is too distracted by this man's existence. She can't focus on the Russian, not when someone so interesting is around. Even if he scares her a little bit, with his bulk and wide shoulders and tight jaw, she is curious about him. Why do they hurt him? Why is he submissive when he could obviously fight them? He could kill them.

Eleven approaches the man. He is sitting on a cot in the dark world. She wonders what his real surroundings are, where he is in the world. As she approaches, his shoulders stiffen. She pauses: does he know she is here?

She takes one more step and he looks up, undoubtedly meeting her eyes. Eleven stiffens. She is not used to people knowing she is here. She didn't think they *could* know she was here. In his eyes she can see so many emotions, but namely pain. It's not physical though, at least not right now. When he was in the chair, the torturous chair, he was in physical pain. Here, on the cot, it's like his emotions are a whirlwind, a vortex of unknowns and thoughts locked away.

Eleven stares back, shocked and curious. His eyes are blue, vibrantly, and stare back at her with an unblinking concentration. Despite the ferocity she sees there, he is slumped forwards with his elbows on his knees and his greasy, unkempt hair hanging over his eyes. There is something defeated in his posture, but Eleven doesn't understand how someone so large, with so much muscle and ferocity, is also so downtrodden. His eyes tell a different story than his posture.

Eleven has never spoken in the dark world, doesn't know if that is how this space works, but thinks she can try. "Hello." It is how people greet one another in the hallways, how Papa sometimes greets Eleven. "Are you... okay?"

The man narrows his eyes, but it's not a threat or menacing, just wondering. Does he speak her language? Can he hear her?

Eleven watches as the man opens his mouth, as if to speak, but nothing comes out and he snaps it closed again. Eleven cocks her head, like a curious bird, and takes a step closer to him. What is wrong? Without thinking, she reaches out with her mind. Where she thinks she will find the man, she feels a turmoil. It's like a rain cloud: dark, whirling, a barely contained storm.

Eleven focuses. She thinks there is something important to this. She has never felt such a complicated person and suddenly an image jumps into her mind, the image of a pale, blonde haired man. His eyelashes have cold attached to the end and his lips are purple like a hazy morning sky. Eleven can tell there is a connection here, some tie between the man before her and the man in her mind. *Steve*. She doesn't know why this name appears in her mind, all while staring into the eyes of the man on the cot. She thinks Steve must be the blonde, the blonde who is sleeping in the cold.

Then, a title jumps to her attention. She does not know where this is coming from, who is providing this information to her. The man? His storm cloud? Perhaps. But she has just learned that the man before her is The Asset. Eleven thinks the title is terrifying.

Eleven gasps awake in the helmet, underwater and in the dark.

"What did you see, Eleven?" Papa asks after she has descended the stairs. "Did you find the Russian again?"

"The other man," she says. "He is American."

4. Steve

Papa will be disappointed. Eleven knows this, but she will pretend she couldn't find the Russian today. Rather than searching for the man from Papa's picture, she focuses all of her concentration on Steve. He is important to the Asset, and Eleven wants to know why there is a connection between them and how she tapped into it. She is curious, a new revelation to her young mind.

Eleven opens her eyes in the dark world and immediately sees a body, lying on the reflective ground, in the distance. Space is strange in the dark world: even though there is no edge, Eleven could say that is where the body, the only other person at the moment, is. The body is neither near nor far however, just on the edge of this space continuum. Eleven goes there.

It takes much longer to travel to the body than Eleven would have thought. She wonders if Papa is growing impatient outside the tank. She worries she won't make it to the body before Papa demands she leave the dark world, peeling back the bath's cover to wake her.

Finally, *finally* , she arrives at the body. Eleven could have guessed, would have been confident in saying that it would be Steve, but here is her proof.

He looks as he did in her vision, the one the Asset may have provided. He is asleep of sorts, but Eleven also feels he may be somewhere near death more so than asleep. He isn't breathing, his chest still and eyes unmoving behind their lids, but she can *feel* that he is alive, no matter how faint that life is. Something tells Eleven he does not have long however, and Eleven suddenly hopes she sees the Asset. An itch in her heart tells her that he needs to know, needs to be told Steve's clock is running out of time.

Despite having been in the chair just yesterday, The Asset feels like he is coming undone. Usually reserved for too many days on a mission, memories from someone else are entering his mind. He hates this, hates this feeling that someone else resides in his body. The Asset wishes this vessel were his own, under his control and command. Instead, he has a roommate and leaves someone else, someone who takes this roommate away, in control. Neither can be without the other, but he wishes he was without either. The Asset simply wants peace.

Curled on the cot, nestled on his side, he remembers the child he had seen. Somehow, the darkness of this cell takes him to a different plane in sleep, somewhere different than dreams. The child had tapped into his mind, had rummaged around in a way that invited his roommate in. Now, he was frozen by visions of snowy mountains and old fashioned sniper rifles. His mind's eye watched a pair of ladies run into a crowd, and a brightly lit ferris wheel turn round and round. Feet danced, women in their kitten heels and men in recently shone shoes. The pain of these moments was intense. The Asset wanted to use the chair again.

Eleven knows she felt this Steve, that he is out there. It's strange, she thinks, that Steve felt so faint. Usually, people are much easier to locate in the dark world. He looked nearly dead, so still and pale. He is undoubtedly alive, however, and she thinks she can sense that something is wrong. Why else would he look so sick?

As she sits in her room, meager meal on a tray in front of her crossed legs, hospital gown brushing her thighs, she thinks she wants to tell the Asset about Steve. Whatever, the connection is between them, she wants him to know Steve is out there.

This is why the next time that Papa takes Eleven to the bath, she is excited. She thinks Papa is suspicious, watching her quicken her pace

towards the bath room. She is never excited about the bath; she is usually anxious and reserved about entering the dark world. However, her want to help the Asset has overtaken her anxiety.

Eleven takes deep breaths as she is lowered into the tank. Today, there are not observers in the room. It is just Papa, the technicians, and her. She is supposed to be observing the same Russian man, and thus far Papa has been satisfied with her reporting the Russian man's connections to the Asset. However, she has not told Papa the extent to which she is interested in him. There is something special there, something not to be shared. If Papa is going to be interested in the Russian, then she is going to be interested in the Asset.

The Asset has been alone for approximately seventy hours when he opens his eyes into his dark cell to see the dark world. He blinks, this location unexpected, and sees the little girl from before.

“Eleven,” she says, pointing to herself.

The Asset does not know why she is speaking to him again. Is she telling him how old she is? Why?

He tries to respond with his age, but realizes he does not know it. He looks into the dark behind her, perplexed. How does he not know this?

The little girl speaks again. “Steve.”

The Asset freezes. Oh no. This is something... something his roommate knows. Something his roommate has drudged from the muddy rivers of the Asset's mind. The name sends a spike into the back of his mind, dragging across his cerebellum, ripping apart the folds.

The little girl takes two steps back as the Asset falls to his knees.

Steve. Why would she say that? How does she know this?

The Asset pants, trying to breath deeply but failing to take more than shallow breaths, ribs barely reaching towards the ground as he supports himself on all fours. He hates this, hates that he has been reduced to a breathless mess, hates that he is in pain, hates that his roommate is thinking, hates that he is in a position which exposes the back of his neck. He shifts his weight onto his legs, sitting on his feet curled beneath his ankles, to look at the little girl. Through the pain, he wonders why she doesn't have hair.

"Steve," he says between his teeth. "Why?"

The little girl reaches forwards, lifting a hand to point straight between the Asset's eyes. "He was in there."

What the *fuck* was this little girl doing in his head to reduce him to *this* .

"He needs... help." Her tiny, barely audible words shoot a spark of anxiety through the Asset. He does not know why he cares so much, but he definitely cares *deeply*.

Fighting through the spike still in his brain, he meets the little girl's eyes. "But what can I do?" he asks. But then he is awake on his cot, the spike still sticking through the back of his head.

The Asset lies awake, staring at the crack of light under the door to his cell. He wonders how the little girl knows about Steve and why the name means so much to him (and his roommate). However, more than anything he feels that he can trust her. This is real, and Steve needs help. The Asset knows what he must do. He cannot forget Steve, he cannot forget this protective feeling.

Over the next twelve hours alone, the Asset forces himself to stay awake. He forces himself to remember Steve, repeating the name over and over despite the railroad spike shoving into his head like a needle digging into fabric, plunging again and again as someone moves the pedal. Only the Asset is pumping the pedal, faster and

faster everytime he thinks the name.

And suddenly, the pain subsides. He is left with a migraine and a memory. It's a simple one, but it explains so much. A tiny, blonde man is before him wearing an oversized jacket and furrowed brow. The Asset sees himself, smaller too and younger. Life has yet to catch up to him.

"I can get by on my own," Steve tells him.

The Asset feels a pang in his heart. He feels his ribs break for Steve, snapping like twigs beneath a shoe. He has been through so much.

"The thing is," he hears himself say, "you don't have to."

The Asset remembers.

5. Nightmares

Steve . The Asset repeats the name over and over again, so he does not forget and lose himself again. *Steve* . The Asset knows he must also have a name like this, full of bounce and ease, but he does not remember. He does know he had a life before this, before cryotanks and dark rooms and missions and submission. There was a name for him in that life.

Lying on the cot in the dark, the Asset realizes this and knows he wants to return to it. The bubble of joy, an emotion so foreign for so long, that appears in his chest when he thinks *Steve* (he dares not say it aloud, he dares not chance *them* hearing him say something from that other life), lets him know he *needs* to return. *Steve* is out there, the little girl knows that, and the Asset will rely on her. She came to him, and if she has that power, then he knows she is right about *Steve*.

The Asset does not remember falling asleep, but suddenly he is strapped to a metal table. The cold seeps through his shirt, just a army issued henley, making his back feel like it is wet, or bloody. To his side is a short man, wearing a lab coat. His back is turned, and the Asset feels the itch of a memory like an ant on his skin. As the small man turns, the Asset first spots the sharp utensil in his hand, a syringe with a long, *long* needle. He knows the scientist intends it for him.

Then the Asset looks at the scientist's face. He expects slightly bug eyes and a wide forehead, a face from this very memory. The Asset is sure, deep in his bones like he is sure he is alive, that this is a memory and not *just* a dream. But when he focuses on the face, it is the sure set jaw, pink lips, and big ears of another man. This is *Steve*. The Asset also knows this like the fact that he is alive.

The Asset screams, closing his eyes tight and turning his head away. Why is he here? When the Asset opens his eyes again, he is in the dark world. He blinks, finding anything to focus on in the void. His breathing regulates quickly, from a harsh pant to deep, calming breaths like before he hits the trigger on his sniper rifle.

A small noise, like a whisper, draws his attention to the right. And there is the girl. She is so small, like she could fit in the palm of his hand. He loves that when he sees her, his brain does not default to all the ways he can kill her, the easiest way to incapacitate her if she were to attack, and every threat she poses. Instead, he feels something that was absent from his life for years: trust.

"Hello," he says. He is surprised at how clear his voice is in the dark world. In real life, it comes out gruff and stilted from lack of use. He doesn't speak much, is not supposed to talk except when the mission demands communication between himself and a team.

"Hello," she responds, something like a smile trying to appear on her lips.

They stare at one another for a long moment. What comes next?

"I'm going to find Steve," the Asset tells her. "I need to find him. He's from... before."

She nods, clinical. "Okay."

"You saw him and that means a lot." He wants her to know that she has changed his life, but he's not sure how to say it.

"I was helpful?"

"Yes."

They stare at one another, and the girl looks scared. Or sad? The Asset is used to seeing a combination of the emotions at the other end of his gun. He can't tell them apart so much anymore. "You are trapped too?"

"I don't know," she says quietly. The Asset cocks his head. She is so somber, and escapes too to the dark world. Is she not like him?

"You can't leave though," he observes for her.

"Leave?"

"Get away. Live elsewhere."

She takes a long time to answer. “No. I’ve always been here.”

The Asset remembers when he felt like that, like his entire life was cryo tanks and orders. “You won’t be,” he promises.

As the words leave his mouth, the girl turns sharply to her right. The Asset follows her look, but it is just more blank darkness and wet floor.

“What?” he asks.

The little girl does not answer, but a scared look takes over her features. The Asset thinks she might cry. She begins taking slow steps towards the noise, and The Asset watches, fearful for her. What can she see that he cannot?

He watches as she reaches out, ever so slowly, as if she is going to touch something. She must make contact, for she retracts her hand at a lightning pace. Then, she screams in fear.

“No!” The Asset yells. She has disappeared before the noise leaves his lips. He is alone in the dark world, but the girl is in trouble. Is the threat in her reality? He thinks it must be, thinks she could only see whatever scared her because it is related to solely her, won’t appear in this space for his eyes.

He must help her. His eyes flash open and he is lying on his side on the cot, nearly curled into a fetal position. He quickly jumps to his feet and begins pacing the dark room. Back and forth, back and forth across the eight feet of space. How will he escape?

Eleven is taken back to her room after leaving the bath, Papa looking disappointed but patient after she delivers him the meager news from her sleuthing. She knows he wants info on the Russian, but she doesn’t much care anymore.

Surrounded by the white cinder blocks, she focuses on a dimple in the stone and tries not to cry. After delivering the information about Steve to the Asset, he is leaving. She supposes she should have seen this coming, realized that telling the Asset someone so vital to him was alive in the world but hurting would make him venture away, but she is not ready to say goodbye to the Asset.

Life has been scary and tense for Eleven until these last few weeks. She doesn't want to go back to that life. The Asset has been a relief from everything, a stable rock in an otherwise ever changing environment (except for Papa's clinical love) and she had needed that.

And now, he will be gone.

Something wet trails down Eleven's face, over the hill of her cheekbone and down the plane of her soft jowl, curving down to her chin, and then drops to the floor. Eleven can't remember if she has ever cried before.

6. The Escape

The Asset has counted the minutes since he left the dark world. It has taken 6,456 for someone to come to his room. This means he is needed for another mission. This is an opportunity.

Despite what he wants to do, he knows disarming the guard or technician is a bad idea. He needs to wait for them to take him above ground, to be somewhere freedom is closer than this underground cell. So when the door slams open and two technicians face him, he complies. They walk down the hall, the Asset between them. Each has a hand on one of his elbows, and he complies like a well trained soldier. They do not know he will defect.

The Asset is taken to a room for a debrief, and his handler paces to and fro across the Asset's vision discussing some political endeavor; intelligence they need reclaimed. He is to kill the head of the operation as well, a man he is shown a grainy photograph of. The Asset barely listens however, there is no point. He knows this mission will not come to fruition.

After the debrief, the Asset is equipped with several grenades and guns, then loaded into a van with large sliding doors on the sides. A worker slams it shut behind him, throwing the Asset into darkness like cargo.

The van begins moving, the engine rumbling and the smell of exhaust seeping through the doors, and then the Asset feels the bump as they leave the garage and they are officially outside. He is excited, his hands practically vibrating, and he holds his pistol to feel more secure. He breathes, counting to twenty like a meditation before he makes his move.

The Asset lifts the gun, lining the muzzle up with the wall of the van. Directly on the other side should be the driver's head, separated by just a thin wall of metal. The bullet shouldn't have a problem making it to his skull. He hesitates. *Steve*. The Asset pulls the trigger.

The van immediately careens off the side of the road and up the curb. Outside, there are shouts as pedestrians must see the car running

wild. The Asset braces himself between the walls, waiting for the impact to jar the doors. He needs the crash to pop them open, freeing him from the cargo bay.

The jolt is massive when the car makes impact, throwing the Asset from his precarious spot and into the barrier between him and the cab. He huffs, breath escaping from his lungs, due to the impact. His head knocks against the wall and he immediately feels hot liquid begin running down his forehead. The Asset ignores it, too used to blood, and knows his skin will sew itself back together within the minute. He focuses solely on the bent side door, not unhinged but damaged enough it should pop loose with a few hefty kicks. The Asset plants his left foot firmly on the floor and dishes three consecutive kicks with his right. *Bang, bang, bang.* The door gives, enough that the Asset can wedge his fingers, covered in leather gloves, into the gap and pull the door open. He steps into the sunlight, squinting, to see that the van made contact with a fire hydrant, bending in the hood and undoubtedly damaging the engine. A crowd has gathered around the scene, a half dozen people concerned and appalled. A mother, child in a stroller, has stopped and is staring at the windshield. She doesn't continue her walk until her baby begins to cry. The Asset turns to see that across the windshield, a huge spray of blood shields the driver from view. He won't be able to use the van. And he is drawing too much attention.

With this knowledge, the Asset decides to take off. He runs down the nearest alley, seeking cover from the witnesses to the crash. The last thing he needs is the KGB finding him because a bystander tracks the most infamous assassin in the world.

The Asset tries to disappear into thin air, to become the ghost story the world has dubbed him. He removes his goggles, tossing them into the nearest dumpster. Until he is safe from the KGB, he won't remove his tactical gear. His bullet proof vest could very well save his life during these next hours. They will be the most stressful and the most threatened. The Asset estimates that the next four hours are the time when it is most likely the KGB will capture him and return him to his handler. After that, he should be too far away and too deeply into his plan for them to catch him. Considering they don't even know he visits the dark world, there is no way for them to know where he is

headed.

Keeping to the shadows, the Asset navigates the city by alleys and any store with entrances on different streets. Surprisingly, department stores become his best friend. If he can enter on one street and exit on another, any chance of someone following him from above or tailing him successfully through the racks of clothes are slim.

When he sees a bus stop, the Asset halts for thirty seconds to memorize the route on the poster pinned to the wall of the stop. It will help him navigate the city, and also shows him where the airport is. This is vital information, as he needs a plane.

Walking to the airport is an all day affair. The Asset wishes he could take a taxi, rather than risking his face being on the street for so many hours. However, he does not have any money and does not want to draw more attention to himself by fleeing a fare-demanding cabbie before even reaching the airport. Having someone screaming at his back upon arrival would raise some red flags.

So he walks through the entire afternoon, sweating beneath the black tactical gear. He slips into a sweatshirt in one of the department stores, removing it from the hanger and sliding it onto his arms while walking, to cover the gear and remain more inconspicuous. He also acquires a pair of sunglasses in a similar fashion. Hopefully, he is largely unrecognizable by now.

Eleven enters the dark world, blinking her eyes open upon the empty space. Today, it is truly empty. Despite focusing on the Asset, she sees nothing. She then glances about hurriedly, hoping the monster is not here again. The tall, menacing creature had terrified her due to it's blooming mouth of teeth, deadly in every sense.

But the dark world is truly empty. Eleven begins to wander, searching for anyone and anything to investigate. She feels that if she tells Papa nothing is here, he will be unhappy with her. She can't have that. Eleven slowly spins, arms heavy at her sides.

And then a small airplane slowly materializes. Eleven is hesitant, looking at it from just the side of her eye, unsure. What is happening?

She takes in the plane, the insignia written in another language and a series of small dents on the side. She realizes someone is in the cockpit. As she realizes this, the person gathers their hair and ties it back in a tiny bun behind their head, revealing their face. *The Asset* .

Eleven closes her eyes for a moment, like a long blink, and opens them again to find herself inside the plane. She wanders the aisle, just a few rows of luxurious, empty seats. She has never seen a place like this, with comfort and hospitality. But more so than the grandeur of the plane, she notices something else: the Asset is alone.

Wandering to the front of the plane, Eleven grips the door to the cockpit with her thin fingers and pulls it open slowly. She is looking at the back of the Asset's head as he flies, but she cannot see what he does beyond the windshield. To her, it is just the endless expanse of the dark world.

"Hello?" she asks. The Asset does not respond. Today is like the first times she had seen him: she is here, but he is not. He is awake, and what he is doing is real. Does this mean he has escaped? Is he saved from the people who put him in the chair?

The Asset had told her he would find Steve. She supposes that is where he is going now. But selfishly, she just wishes he was still in the dark world. Eleven never had someone to talk to before, even if their conversations had made her nervous and she never knew what to say. The Asset understood her though, was the only person she had ever seen in the dark world that saw her too. He doesn't cherish that like she does. He has bigger things to think about.

After Eleven has awoken and left the tank, she is lead back to her room. There, she sits and stares at the white cinder block centered above her bed. She screws her eyes, wrinkling her nose and knitting

her brow as she tries not to cry again.

Eleven tells herself it will be okay. She survived years without the Asset, she can survive years more. The only problem is, now that she has had a friend, being without feels that much more deafeningly lonely.

7. Flying

The Asset lands the plane on a piece of farm land in Prussia, tearing through a cropless field. He hopes he at least helped churn the soil, rather than pure damage. He is several dozen kilometers from the nearest town, where he plans to acquire gas for the plane. Taking such a small vessel had been an oversight he now realizes. Although the private plane had been less conspicuous to steal than a passenger plane, its gas tank is much smaller.

As he disembarks, the Asset realizes this oversight might be a result of the surplus of memories he has been experiencing over the last day. Shortly after departing for the airport, he had begun to be distracted. Everytime he looked at someone or something, a new memory connected marginally to the person or object would appear, like his life was replaying itself out of order. It was projected over top of his mission in his brain, covering the details as it stole center stage. It was making him sloppy, and he hoped it would stop soon.

However, the Asset is also learning a lot. Despite images of a tiny version of Steve, the one he had known most of his life before...well whatever had happened to him to turn him into a lethal assassin, playing over every moment of his mind, he is enjoying the replay. Little did he know they went on double dates with same sex female couples to parade an idea of heterosexuality, and little did he know he spent so many summer evenings lying on the wood floors of their studio apartment, just sweating beside one another as they talked about the future. Steve permeates every memory, from kindergarten to the war, and the Asset doesn't know how someone managed to become so entangled in his mess of a life.

The Asset just wishes he would know his own name.

Digging through a small shed to the side of the house, the Asset finds two metal containers for gasoline. One is partially full, and he easily carries it back to the plane and dumps the few gallons into the tank. Then, he piles both gas cans and every other vessel for transporting liquid into the back of a beat up truck on the dirt driveway.

A woman comes out of the house, yelling in German and brandishing

her fist. When the Asset looks at her through his curtain of greasy hair, arm glinting in the afternoon light, she quickly quiets.

“ Keys ,” he asks her in German. He doesn’t mean for it to sound so harsh, but maybe his vocal cords don’t know what “pleasant” is anymore.

The woman goes inside and returns, shaking, as she hands him the key for the old truck. He keeps a hand on his gun, so she will continue to help him, but he has no intentions of shooting her. His mind shows him the war, when he had full intentions of shooting everyone so as to return to Steve as soon as possible. “ *I’ll be back* ,” he tells her, and he hopes she believes him.

The Prussian woman watches as he starts the truck and drives away, bouncing over the uneven gravel and out of sight. It will take him several hours to get gas and return, and he hopes that when he does, the police are not waiting for him. Then he probably will have to kill some people he doesn’t want to.

This time when Papa walks Eleven to the bath, she pictures the Russian in her mind rather than the Asset. If he has left her, then she supposes she will finally help Papa fulfill his quest.

As she is lowered into the bath, stoic technicians peering down at her as the water rises from her toes to her shoulders, she pictures the Russian in her mind. She flips between him with the fur hat in the picture Papa shows her and how she had seen him when he had stood by while the Asset was tortured. She shivers, despite the water being perfectly tuned to her body temperature.

She closes her eyes when Papa slides the cover shut on the bath, and then she is in the dark world. Immediately, the Russian materializes and she wonders how he has appeared so quickly. It soon becomes clear that the energy output he is fueling, the pure rage stemming from his being, made him easier to locate than ever before.

Hands in the air and voice bellowing in Russian, the man delivers a verbal assault to another man cowering on the floor. It is the same man who has been present before when Eleven has seen the Asset. A file is in the Russian's hand and Eleven approaches from behind, wary. She knows he cannot hear her—the Asset is the only one who has ever been aware of her here—but she finds herself nervous his rage will turn upon her.

Despite the file folder moving with every angry wave of the Russian's hands, Eleven manages to see the picture paper clipped to the top left corner. It is a photograph of the Asset, frozen behind a small window encased in metal. The rest of the page is in Russian, notes scrawled in a fine handwriting down the entire page. A sudden jab of his hand forward, toward the other man (like a threat), sends a few pages from behind the picture flying. Eleven runs to look at them. She tells herself she is following Papa's request, that she is gleaning information on the Russian. But really, she is trying to find out more about the Asset.

As she crouches over the papers, she realizes these are in a different language. This one is accompanied by more pictures though, and Eleven almost looks away. She cannot however, as the gruesome images are too interesting. They reveal so much about the Asset, things she has a hunger to know. The first one is the severed stump of an arm, flesh hanging loosely where a bicep should have been. The next one is just a shoulder joint devoid of any limb, cleanly amputated with skin healed over in a nasty array of scarring. Then, the same shoulder with lines drawn on, markings for something. The final picture makes it clear what the marking are for; a metal device is attached to the joint, somehow inserted into the shoulder.

Eleven looks through the other fallen papers and finds a sketch of what is undeniably the Asset's metal arm. Dimensions and details narrate the illustration, arrows and specs leading all around the page. Eleven cannot make sense of it, but she does understand that the Asset is enhanced, unnatural. Perhaps not unlike herself.

The sketch disappears as the Russian collects his papers. Eleven looks up, startled, as he snatches them from the floor. He is just inches away, and she doesn't know what would happen if she accidentally "touched" him while in the dark world. Would he know she is here

somehow? She has never touched someone before.

Eleven looks around for the other man, the one receiving the verbal assault, and sees a body slumped on the floor, blood pouring from a bullet wound on his head. She had been so engrossed in the file, she hadn't heard the gunshot.

Suddenly, water surrounds Eleven as she wakes in the bath, a giant sob heaving from her lungs.

When the Asset returns, truck rumbling up the road with the back end sitting lower due to the weight of the gas containers, he is greeted by a thin man with a gun sitting on the porch. When the man spots the truck, he cocks the gun and stands. The Asset sighs. He doesn't want to have to kill anyone today.

Attempting to avoid the conflict (something his training never instilled in him, he *really* must be returning to his former self), he drives past the house and straight onto the grass, heading for the farm field. Angry German yelling follows him as he plows on, hoping the man will give up when he sees that he is simply filling the tank of the plane.

However, when the Asset puts the truck in park and jumps out, he sees the man (presumably the husband of the woman from earlier) running to the farm field. The Asset reaches inside his sweatshirt and draws his weapon, pointing it at the farmer. They freeze, in a standoff, as both stare down the barrel at the other. The Asset sighs and quickly drops his gun to shoot the farmer in the foot. Screeching in pain, he crumples to the ground. The Asset runs forwards, taking the farmer's gun and throwing it through the open door of the plane to keep. Then he fills the gas tank of the plane, keeping half an eye on the farmer, but he poses no threat anymore as he cowers on the ground, bleeding. The Asset briefly wonders if he should take him back to the farmhouse, but shakes the idea from his mind.

When the tank is full, the Asset moves the truck out of the way and runs up the steps into his small plane. He buckles into the pilot's seat and starts the engine, happy to be on his way again. He almost clips the roof of the farmhouse as he takes off, heading west.

8. A Name

Relying solely on the cobwebs of old mission conditioning and his own need to be as far from Russia as possible and still obtain information, the Asset lands his commandeered jet next just off the coast in Basque, Spain. The rough cliffs that touch the water offer some coverage for his landing, swooping close to the water's surface to decelerate before alighting on a coastal road and pulling the plane off the pavement. The cliffs also lend themselves (or at least used to) covering small entrances to caves.

If the Asset's memory serves him right (which is a gamble even when the odds are best), a bunker was carved into these sea cliffs. Once, he had returned here post mission. Like a migrating bird, he relies on his feelings to find the cave entrance. He's not tuned into the earth's gravitational pull though, just poking at his own mind as he walks along the cliff. Quickly, he begins sweating under his kevlar gear, the bullet proof vest he hasn't taken off since his escape holding in his body heat.

It takes long enough to find the cave that the Asset begins to worry about the plane. It is miles away just off a road. If he loses the plane, he is fucked. But once he recognizes the stretch of cliff, a path leading in a tight zigzag down the face, he knows its worth the risk for the information inside. He shuffles down the path, the ocean far below, as the dirt trail switches backs on itself. His thick tactical boots slip on the loose dirt, but he keeps his balance with soldier's ease.

At the base of the cliff, half covered by water, is the entrance to the base. It was made to be accessible mostly by boat, this foot entrance only for atypical use. Like now.

As soon as the Asset steps inside, he is assaulted by memories of his last visit here. His brain tries to take his feet down a specific hallway, one his handler had guided him to. He has a strong mental image of technicians following him into a room there before the Asset consciously cuts the memory off. He was wiped in a room down that hall, and finding his feet itching in that direction unnerves him. He won't go there.

Instead, the Asset takes himself down a wider hallway, one which saw more traffic when this base was under operation. Right now, it's empty. There is no sound but the lap of the ocean at the mouth of the cave and languid drips from the rocks. Whatever their goal had been in this country, it seems to have been achieved and this bunker shut down. Although gear still lines the walls near the entrance—a weapons cache should a KGB agent ever need it—and one boat bobs (tied) within the mouth of the cave, the Asset is positive the bunker will be empty.

The Asset tries to remember if he ever walked this hall before. He doesn't think so, as traveling it does not jog any memories. Frustrated, he simply tries the first door he comes to. It is locked, the knob and bolt heavy duty. He uses his metal arm to twist the knob, breaking off the catch before slamming his fist down on the bolt to open the door. They'll know he was here (no one else could break the door like this) but he doubts this evidence of his travels will be discovered for some time.

Inside the room, it is dark and the Asset unclips a flashlight (taken from an emergency kit on the airplane) from his belt. There is a long metal table and maps hung on the walls. They curl at the edges, the cave humid from the ocean right outside. However, it is cooler than the hallway due to being closed for so long. The Asset swings his arms to cool his sticky skin as he takes in the room. There are no filing cabinets, no desks, and no storage. He doubts there will be anything helpful here.

The Asset moves to the next room in the hallway, his search becoming methodical rather than based on his patchwork memories and conditioning. Far down the hall, around a corner and deep into the darkness of the unused facility is the first room to yield results. It appears to have been an office of a high ranking agent while the bunker was in operation. The Asset slides open the top drawer and begins reading the folder labels.

Much of the paperwork is written in code, mission titles and project labels he does not recognize. Despite being one of the KGB's most valuable weapons, he knows little about their true operations. Between the limited information given to him on missions and wipes after to attempt erasure of the memories, the Asset is probably one of

the most clueless people in the organization. This means he must read each piece of paper, looking for clues and details to piece together the information with. He settles into the chair behind the desk, a hard metal seat, to read by the flashlight's beam.

After several hours, the Asset finds his first clue about America's Cold War efforts. He knows Eleven is there. After all, they had spoken in English and he doubts a girl her age would know more than one language, especially seeing as she barely grasps the one she defaults to. He has considered the prospect of Eleven being a decoy, meant to draw the Asset in for capture by another agency, but dispelled this idea upon introspection. How would someone know his true identity to know about Steve if he doesn't even know it himself? The KGB seem to be in the dark about his origins too, having left his conditioning with the hole that allowed him to escape once he knew Steve's name again. He doubts anyone has the information about the Asset's previous life in order to hack his mind in the way he briefly imagined Eleven to. No, he believes she is authentic. He believes she truly felt Steve.

The file is difficult to understand, as code names are used for every American agent mentioned and it references missions the Asset has no information about. He doubts he was involved in them, however, as the nature seems to be reconnaissance. The Asset's specialty is elimination: he is violent. He does not steal file folders and plant bugs inside lamps and smoke detectors. However, the locations of the missions are uncoded (as who needs to code cities like Salt Lake City and Port Canaveral). Based on the activity recorded at each mentioned American government facility, there are two dabbling with people in the way the Asset imagines someone with the abilities like Eleven would be used. She can see people through another realm, which obviously lends itself to spying. The people running America's "NASA" program don't care about reconnaissance, and neither do the people in Arizona mixing chemicals and making nuclear reactors. This leaves the Asset with possibilities in Hawkins, Indiana and Burlington, Kansas.

The Asset takes the file folder beneath the papers and rips off a corner. Here, he scribbles the coordinates of the two facilities. His handwriting looks strange, and the Asset realizes he cannot

remember ever writing while on a mission. He does not write reports, he verbalizes them to his handlers. He would not have any other reason to write. He memorizes names and facts right before going into missions. The Asset looks down at the beige paper in his hand, thick like cardstock but limp from the humidity. Why is he writing it down now? The Asset can't tell if his memory is slipping, that he feels he will forget, or if this is something hardwired more deeply than the Asset's protocols. Maybe this is also from his life with Steve.

He tucks the coordinates into his pocket, patting it to make sure the paper is secure, and leaves the office. In the hallway, he debates if he should explore more of the base. What if there is more information, or equipment that will be helpful in this mission to find Eleven so they can search for Steve?

And that's when the flashlight stutters, then goes out.

Eleven enters the tank, muscles feeling jittery. She is nervous, like she doesn't remember being before. It's almost in anticipation, nerves of excitement *and* unease for what she will witness.

Inside the tank, she closes her eyes before the cover over the glass of the tank has been shut. She closes them tight, picturing the Asset in her mind like a prayer.

When she opens them, the world seems darker than usual. Eleven blinks into the dark, light barely legible from an unknown source. She sees movement, a body sharply whipping around. She blinks again, eyelashes fluttering, and the Asset appears. He looks confused, almost manic. His pupils are huge, his head tilting oddly like he is listening intently. Eleven watches him, curious.

"Hello?" She says, barely above a whisper. Her voice feels wasted in this space today, lost to the darkness. The shallow water of the floor looks sinister, a dead sea as Eleven watches the Asset become panicked. His hands scramble along an unseen wall and Eleven draws

closer, hoping to help despite distance and the barrier of the this dark world.

When she is close, just a breath away from being able to clutch his hand and guide him through his panic, she hears him murmur.

“Remember. Remember.”

The Asset feels his fingers contact the wall, telling him where the hallway is. Despite his eyes straining for sight, there is simply no light for them to absorb this deep within the cave. The flashlight's death has plunged him into a labyrinth. He tries to calm the panic building deep beneath his ribs, shaking the bones like the tremors of the earth.

With the cold of the rock solid against his palm, the Asset begins to retrace his steps towards the cave's entrance. His feet are slow, almost stilted. Relying on his memory, he becomes nervous. If he can't remember his own name, how does he expect to remember his way out of this base?

The Asset wanders a straight path down the hallway, using the wall as a guide until his hand is hanging in the air: an intersection. He knows he came from here, snapped the lock on each door and checked the contents of the room inside for his treasure. But now, pressured to know, he cannot.

Trying to remember memories from years ago is like dredging bodies from a muddy river bottom. Hours and days spent in pitch black appear in his mind, cold and silence and loneliness chipping away at his mind like a pickaxe. They were molding him, sculptors picking at the surface to create something new beneath. Only, the harsh corners of a marble block did not become a god. No, the fine hero became a sharp edged demon.

The Asset sinks to the ground like his legs are melting beneath him.

He assumes the position his mind produces from that dark cell, folded chin to his knees, eyes pressed to the hard surface of his kneecaps until he sees stars. His mind is useless except for poor timing and recalling torture.

Slowly, a different kind of darkness takes over, a memory of a dim apartment lit only by the lights outside a window. The Asset knows the electricity is off, a bill overdue. How, he cannot say. He simply knows. A small body is pressed against his side as they sit on a singular mattress lying on the floor.

“Bucky,” the person says, and it’s Steve’s voice, slightly biting but mostly burning like the sun, “someday we will see the Grand Canyon. And there will be stars and the moon to light the night.”

Steve has given him his name. Bucky remembers.

9. The Demogorgon

Eleven carefully unlocks her room, feeling for the mechanism in the door with her mind. The sounds she can hear from the hallway are terrifying: screams, alarms, sirens. Whatever is happening in this building, she knows that she doesn't want to be here anymore.

She steps into the hallway, barefoot, and looks left. Then right. Alarms blare, the sharpest noises she can imagine. There is silence in her head however; she does not know how to leave the building.

Eleven, to the best of her knowledge, has never been outside these walls. She hadn't known there was a world beyond these white cinder blocks until just a month ago.

The sirens, louder in the hallway, are too distracting for her to feel with her mind. She chooses left at random to begin her escape, heading down a long white hall.

She reaches a T intersection. One of the hallways is the one that she takes to the bath with Papa. A technician runs past, not noticing her, and stumbles to the opposite end of the path from the bath. He slams his hand into a button at waist height, eyeing the sleek door ahead of him. Assuming he is fleeing too, Eleven follows at a distance.

The lights flicker. A jolt goes through Eleven's stomach and she cringes away from the ceiling, like they are at risk of exploding and reigning sparks down on her.

By the technician, the door peels open at the seam. He hurries inside and punches a button on the inside of the wall. Eleven slips into the corner of the tiny room, as far from the technician as possible. She needs his knowledge of the building to get away, to find safety, but doesn't know what will happen when he notices her. The doors slips shut behind Eleven.

The room they have entered begins to move and Eleven's eyes go wide. She tucks further into the corner, bracing her hands against the wall, a steady force against all of this new experience.

As they descend, there is suddenly a bang from above. Eleven cowers towards the floor. What is happening now? She feels out with her mind and finds a large mass on the other side of the ceiling. She gathers herself, preparing to use her power to throw the *thing* off of their escape vessel, when she recognizes him.

The small hatch in the ceiling is ripped away and there is the Asset. His hair is still wild and unkempt, but there is something different about his eyes. They are clear now in a way Eleven never saw them in the dark world, like a veil peeled away. His eyes first see the technician, loathe coating his expression, and then flick to Eleven and ease.

Eleven has never felt this before, the sense of letting out her breath (one she has possibly been holding for years). She feels that it is safe, that nothing bad can happen now. Is this relief?

The Asset swings into the space, using his momentum to slam a foot into the fearful technician's chest. Eleven watches as the technician's already scared face turns terrified as he is thrown back, limbs following the movement of his torso, like a ragdoll, before his back hits the wall. And then he crumples to the floor.

Eleven turns to the Asset standing sure footed in the middle of the room, shoulders filling the space above her head.

"I found you," he says, and his voice is both worn, old, and unused, but also young and alive. Boyish even. He settles onto one knee and holds out his right hand, elbow resting on his leg. "I'm Bucky."

Eleven looks at Bucky's hand, then at his eyes, nearly level with her own now that he is on his knee. She doesn't know what he expects so she reaches out and simply touches one of his fingers. His skin is rough, worn. His fingers are calloused and his nails chewed short, not unlike Eleven's.

Bucky cocks his head and looks up. Does he hear something she doesn't? She feels out with her mind and immediately becomes aware of another presence. Bucky stands, their hands falling apart.

And then there is a noise like slime peeling away, a grotesque noise

of entrance. They both spin, immediately spotting movement on the wall, the surface stretching and distorting as *something* pushes its way into the room, into this realm. The lights begin flashing, erratically, like someone is standing beside the switch and flipping, flipping flipping.

Eleven gasps and feels a hand on her shoulder. It is Bucky, his human hand keeping her from slamming backwards into his knees as she backs away from the creature. She latches a hand onto his pants, right beside his knee, and he scoops her into his arms.

They both watch, bodies taut and ready to fight, as a creature—the demogorgon—emerges from the wall. This room is too small, the demogorgon will practically be on top of them. Bucky turns to the door, digging his metal fingers into the seam and ripping it open to reveal floors flying past as the room continues to move. He punches the same hand through the button panel to the side of the door, ripping wiring and bolts from inside the wall so the room will stop moving.

When it does, the opening is split by the floor of one level and the ceiling of another. Bucky pushes Eleven out and follows behind, crouching to exit the small room. The demogorgon is right behind him, slithering straight out of the wall and into pursuit.

Eleven clenches her jaw, brow furrowed, ready to fight despite her quivering nerves. However, Bucky scoops her up in one arm, balancing her on his hip as he moves further from the small room and down the hallway before them. He spins, Eleven sliding an arm around his neck to keep her balance and not tumble from his arms. She focuses on the creature, feels for it with her mind, feeling for a weakness. Her nose begins to bleed.



The demogorgon rises from all fours to just two feet and spins its jawed head towards them. The multiple hinges for its maw open and it *screams* .

Bucky raises his metal hand, free of wiring now and bearing a firearm. He takes aim, the weapon inhumanly steady.

One, two, three bangs sound. The demogorgon is hit in the chest first, causing it to stutter one step. The second impact causes a spray of inky blood and flesh to explode from its head and the third lands on the side of the demogorgon's neck. The creature keeps advancing.

Bucky nudges Eleven with his elbow, almost bouncing her, and she realizes that he wants her to climb onto his shoulders. This gives him a free hand to produce from somewhere within his tactical gear more ammunition for his weapon. He reloads.

Eleven knows this will not be helpful however, can feel that the demogorgon was barely hindered by the bullets and will not be killed by such basic, man-made means. She wraps her arms as far as they will reach around Bucky's head to secure herself, careful that she doesn't cover his eyes. Bucky releases more bullets, stepping backward as the demogorgon continues to approach, practically stalking them.

In what is perhaps the first executive decision of her life, Eleven begins to scramble down the back of Bucky. She uses the straps and

clasps of his tac gear as handholds. Like a squirrel, she ends on all fours and flanks the demogorgon, feeling out with her mind for its weak spot.

“Eleven!” Bucky shouts, clearly unhappy with her departure from his being. She ignores him, briefly closing her eyes to use her sense without the clutter of sight.

In the millisecond they are closed, there is a roar and a sharp inhale. Eleven flashes her eyes open to see the demogorgon lung forward to slash Bucky. He seems to have mostly been protected by his tactical gear, but some crimson blood is leaking from a deep, singular cut. One claw must have pierced through.

Bucky is on all fours, having been pushed back. The demogorgon and Bucky stalk in a slow circle, two predators and no prey. Eleven watches from the side, transfixed. There is something different about seeing Bucky’s blood than the blood of the technicians she has killed. It disturbs some protective part of her, a selfless desire to help.

Eleven plants her feet and faces the demogorgon. She reaches into the recesses of her mind and taps into the energy she had used to kill those technicians, the part of her that can pick and poke, can choose to break the little pieces that mean the most. She feels powerful this time however, not scared. Not worthless.

The demogorgon freezes as it feels something. It turns to Eleven, perplexed, head cocked. Eleven and the demogorgon face one another as she raises her hands, taking control of the situation. Behind the demogorgon, Bucky looks on in wonder. Eleven’s face scrunches, her muscles all clenching as she grapples with the force, like a pressure pushing at her skin. It must be controlled, it has a volatile nature she can feel in her fingernails and stubbled hair. Realizing she is holding her breath, Eleven lets out a puff of air, her lips popping apart like a seam.

The demogorgon’s spell is broken. Despite the alien force still pushing at its being, it begins to advance on Eleven. She takes a step back, arms still outstretched, still searching to wrangle the force into a usable weapon. Bucky takes aim with his weapon again, two quick bangs sounding as he fires into the haunch of the demogorgon to no

avail.

Eleven feels something wet falling from her nose, like the feeling of snot but warmer. She is doing something right.

“Eleven?!” Bucky sounds hysteric but she ignores him for a moment. This is it.

In an attempt to use all of her muscles, every bit of power her tiny body is capable of, Eleven screams. She screams and she twists her hands, all focus on the demogorgon. It freezes--an alien stillness--and then cowers, hunching its shoulders in on itself. Eleven does not know how it expresses itself, but in that moment she *knows* it fears her. The lights flash haphazardly above, mixing with the red flash of the emergency system's bulbs. Eleven screws her face in concentration, and suddenly the demogorgon is dissipating. It's body is flaking away, drifting into the ether. It makes no noise, the reptilian grunts and groans gone.

When the demogorgon's remains clear, Eleven is looking at Bucky. They meet eyes, both breathing heavily and bleeding. Bucky points to Eleven's face, where she knows blood runs from her nostril to her lip. She think it might be coming out of her ears too.

“Does that happen often?”

Bucky watches Eleven open her mouth to respond, but a slow clap interrupts her. They both turn to see a tall man with gray hair emerge from a shadowed doorway. His lab coat is disheveled, but his tie and white shirt underneath are perfectly pressed. Bucky glances at Eleven to see some emotion come over her, a slump settling into her shoulders and a hang to her head. Bucky quickly moves to her side.

“And who might you be?” the man asks, eyes on Bucky.

Bucky opens his mouth and almost says his Asset name, the code he gives to his handlers. No, that's *wrong* . He doesn't do that anymore.

Then, he is almost tempted to say “the Winter Soldier.” He feels sure a man in this sort of government facility will have heard of him; the reputation tends to precede him. But that’s not Bucky anymore either. “Sergeant James Barnes,” Bucky hears himself say. He almost adds “of the 107th” like his brain is driving itself.

“Well Sergeant,” the man continues, and Eleven stiffens at the serious tone that has entered his cadence, “I am going to have to ask you to return Eleven to me.”

“So she can be locked in a lab?” Bucky snaps back. He slowly reaches behind himself, detaching a grenade from his belt. The man is standing almost twenty feet from them and appears unarmed, although Bucky assumes they are being watched from other angles. If he rolls the grenade and flees with Eleven, they will easily be out of the blast radius. The gunmen who are undoubtedly lurking will be a problem, however.

“To protect her,” the man says in response. “In the wrong hands, she would be manipulated. Tortured to perform acts she would never want to.” Bucky freezes. It’s like this man knows, is aware of exactly what to say to stiffen Bucky’s spine. He ignores the memories tickling at his brain, trying to creep in under the doors he had spent the airspace over the Atlantic deadbolting. No, no, no, no, no. This man unnerves Bucky. This man reminds Bucky of his handlers.

“Here, we just help her... unlock her potential,” the man continues, and Eleven’s little hand grips onto Bucky’s thick tactical pants.

Bucky pulls the pin and rolls the grenade towards the silver haired man.

“No!” Eleven says, and Bucky looks down at her, shocked. He thought this man scared her, was *her* handler. Why is she distraught?

The split second distraction derails Bucky’s entire plan. The man leaps away from the grenade as Bucky belatedly grabs Eleven under the arms and puts her on his back like a baby monkey. He draws his gun again and turns towards the window, looking outside to where his stolen car waits. They must be on just the second floor, the tops of the trees higher than the view from the window.

A gunshot rings out, however, and Bucky takes a staggering step backward, almost taking a knee. With the wind knocked out of him, he looks down to where his bullet proof vest has stopped a piece of ammo from piercing the left side of his chest. He tries to get a breath through his nose but it takes several tries as his body protests.

“Bucky?” Eleven asks. She is hunkered behind his shoulders, using his bulk as protection from the unseen gunman. Her voice is tiny, really just a whisper in his ear. It coaxes him to take a stumbling step forward. Then, it’s like the movement releases his lungs. He makes a break for the window, the ping of bullets hitting the ground behind him and encouraging him to move faster. Right before reaching the glass, he pulls Eleven around his body and into his chest, curling around her as he uses his shoulder to break the window. The tinkling of the glass combines with the boom of the grenade, the explosion breaking the panes around them as they depart. A gush of air explodes out behind them, pushing Bucky and Eleven further from the building. They fall the one story to the grass below. They are fucking lucky it isn’t pavement.

Bucky rolls upon impact, Eleven still protected by his wrapped limbs, and then springs to his feet. With his tiny companion under one arm, he sprints to the car and slides into the driver’s seat, setting Eleven into shotgun.

“Get down, get down!” he tells her, spotting the gunman at the broken window looking disheveled from the explosion but very alive. He takes aim at their car, a white station wagon with wood paneling, and lets out a round of shots at the windshield.

“*Fuck*,” Bucky spits as the windshield begins to crack. He throws the car, which he had left running, into reverse despite its protests and navigates backwards with just the rearview mirror so he can keep an eye on the gunman. On the roof, another man appears and Bucky whips the car through the gate, broken from his entrance, and out of view off the shoulder of the road before more bullets come their way.

“Safe?” Eleven asks from the floor, tucked against the glovebox and barely able to see the world outside the windows.

“Not quite yet,” Bucky says, shifting the car into drive and kareening

away from the facility. A literal dust cloud rises from the shoulder as he pulls back onto the pavement, briefly in view of the gunmen again before he floors it, shifting the car's gears as fast as his flesh hand can and gripping indents into the steering wheel with his left one.

10. Files

Eleven feels as though she spends most of her life these days waiting in the plane. Bucky lands it at continuously stranger locations, asks her to wait and hide if anyone investigates the vessel, then disappears for entire days. The pros to this is having as many frozen waffles as she wants. Bucky tells her that even if he can barely remember being a functional human, the amount she *wants* to eat is inappropriate and not what she *should* eat. She thinks a dozen frozen waffles sounds excellent, however.

Bucky sometimes brings back little toys and gadgets for her, like occasionally on these self assigned missions he remembers he is the caretaker of a very unique child. The seats of the plane have become assigned to a few dolls, one colorful cube Eleven is not sure what to do with, a little tin soldier, and a heap of blankets.

Patience is a virtue Eleven learned from long days waiting for Papa to arrive. These days stowed away in a private plane alone she finds much more comfortable than waiting in her room at the lab. And she knows Bucky is looking for information. He is trying to locate his Steve. And Eleven can't fault him for that.

Bucky has been crouched on the floor, carefully disconnecting wires in the circuit box for much longer than he'd like. He feels that he has overstayed his welcome in this electrical closet and someone will find him imminently. He glances over his shoulder as he pulls the last wire out, effectively shutting off the motion sensors in the file room he needs. Leave it to Steve to get his file in the confidential room of one of the highest security buildings Bucky has ever encountered.

Bucky makes a quick exit, swinging the door open soundlessly. He'd stolen a uniform from a technician arriving at the loading bay for work and doesn't think he will be recognizable, but there are people in this building who would know his face. Even beneath the cap and

with long hairs framing it (the rest pulled back at the nape of his neck) he thinks Peggy Carter would know him. Or, at least the memories he has of her suggest she would.

It had been slow going to discover any information about Steve. Eleven can tell Bucky that his body is underwater, and that he's frozen (but alive) but nothing more concrete about his exact whereabouts. This meant Bucky needed information, which first came from archived newspapers in the Library of Congress. That is how he had discovered that Steve had been announced missing in action (just days after Bucky's own announcement) then pronounced dead after years had passed and the war had ended without seeing hide nor hair of the icon.

This lead Bucky to break into the headquarters for the military in Virginia. This had gotten him nowhere, however, as all information on the Howling Commandos was bare minimum. Everything Bucky found in the files there he could have read in the newspapers in the Library of Congress or gleaned from his own scattered memories. It didn't make any sense: why wouldn't the military have record of their own missions and operations?

And this had lead Bucky to S.H.I.E.L.D. Apparently, Peggy Carter herself was a founder and boy-oh-boy, he was going to break into her building. Bucky didn't have many memories available of the other founder, Howard Stark, but just a quick look in the George Washington University library had revealed four people to have written biographies about him and over three dozen scientific articles he had written, almost all pertaining to technology sciences and weaponry.

This led Bucky to the D.C. city hall, where he was able to locate schematics for the building. He doubted they were actually accurate, sure Stark would have something up his sleeve for extra security, but it was a start. Two days of recon on the building--watching people move through each entrance and exit, following the glass elevator's rise and fall with binoculars from his perch in a tree across the Potomac, and swiping an ID card from the pocket of a man on his lunch break to see if he could replicate it--all lead Bucky to this. Taking the stairs two at a time to the file room on the top floor, just one room over from Peggy Carter's office. It's also just down the hall

from Howard Stark's board room where he is scheduled to be carrying a meeting *right now* . However, Bucky is ninety nine percent sure Peggy is also in the meeting which means they are probably both too busy to notice one repair man floating around the floor. And hopefully this means Stark won't know all of his motion sensors were turned off ten seconds ago.

Bucky slips into the file room, having also disarmed the lock too with his wire tampering. However, inside Bucky has no idea of the layout or organization, the room having been a blank rectangle besides its label on the building plans.

"Here goes nothing."

Bucky slips between the rows of cabinets, reading the small black labels on each drawer. They are more or less in code, but Bucky remembers writing reports of the Howling Commando missions and is hopeful that when he sees their label, he will simply know it. Perhaps it is a shot in the dark, but its a shot he has decided to take. He needs to find Steve. He needs to *rescue* Steve. Plain and simple.

It's towards the back of the room, where the filing cabinets turn to brown filing boxes, that his memory is jogged. Bucky crouches beside the box, second from the bottom in its stack, and stares at the BDDFMRH. He can't even remember all the Commandos names, but he knows this is their initials, followed by an H for Hydra. This he knows in his bones. He quickly (but quietly) unstacks the boxes and reverently takes the lid off of the box of interest.

The first paper is a report from Steve of his unsanctioned mission to rescue Bucky. He scans the document, hungry for memories. However, he finds himself dropping the paper, cringing back, upon reading a name. *Arnim Zola* . Bucky breathes deeply through his nose, trying to calm himself. He hasn't seen Zola in years (he doesn't think) and his brain definitely has never considered him a handler, just the experimenter. It's okay. He can do this.

Bucky approaches the box again, flesh hand shaking slightly. He will have to be careful--he can't risk triggering any torture memories right now. Slowly, he paws through the file folders, the worn paper soft against his fingers. He pulls out reports as he goes, reading the

mission locations and recognizing some, but not all. His memories of the war are--surprise, surprise--still spotty.

It's disconcerting to find Steve's report of the mission when Bucky fell from the train. The handwriting looks barely like Steve's, the usual illegible mess even worse. There are wrinkled spots on the report, like it had been splashed with water. Bucky tries not to think too long about why. He slips the report back into the folder and flips to the next paper.

Operation Door Knocker . Bucky doesn't doubt this plan was Steve's. "Captain Rogers will be captured to gain access to the base." Of fucking course he will. And Bucky sees that he did. However, the report is written by Peggy, her sloping cursive familiar to Bucky's eyes.

"Captain Rogers boarded the departing aircraft in an effort to keep it from reaching the United States." Bucky doesn't like the sound of this. "It was carrying bombs created by the tesseract intended for the east coast." Bucky scans further down the page. "Rogers gained control of the aircraft after killing Schmidt (method: unknown). However, the autopilot was engaged on the aircraft with a course set for New York City. Rogers made the executive decision to land the plane in the ocean."

Bucky sets the paper on his knee and looks at the ceiling, remembering to take a breath. He closes his eyes for a long blink, then looks back at the paper. "Agent Carter was in communications with Captain Rogers until the radio cut out, assumed to be the moment of impact." Bucky is going to *kill* Steve when he finds him. He is going to wake Steve up and probably cry a little bit and then he is going to kill him for fucking crashing a Nazi plane into the Atlantic.

The rest of the page details the U.S. forces evacuating the Alps Hydra base and confiscating the remaining Hydra weapons for Howard Stark to investigate. Bucky hungrily looks for the next report. There is a page discussing the reassignment of the Commandos to other efforts following Schmidt's death and Steve's disappearance, then a series of reports by Peggy. Bucky reads them at lightning speed, engrossed in the information.

“Stark developed submarines capable of reaching up to 500 meters to search for Rogers. Agent Carter and Mr. Stark attempted to calculate an area for search based on known information about the aircraft, but the speed at which Captain Rogers was flying when the craft crashed was unknown.” Great, so there’s no information to go off of. Bucky looks through the maps and diagrams that follow, routes Peggy and Howard searched for Steve. The ocean is massive, so there are obviously large gaps of unsearched water. However, they did search the entire area where debris assumed to be from the plane was found. The wind speeds and direction on the day of the crash were recorded as well to account for the waves carrying the debris away from the spot of impact. Bucky rolls all of the maps and tucks them into his pocket. By the time someone revisits these files, he will be long gone. The last piece of paper in the box is a death certificate. They declared Steve dead after five years M.I.A. *Five* . It took five years of the government--along with two of the smartest people Bucky ever knew--to give up looking for Steve. Bucky sits back for a moment, rubbing his right hand over his face. Can he and Eleven really find Steve? Bucky has a lot of faith in her, especially after what he had seen while fighting the demogorgon, but anyone would have their doubts in this situation. If Howard Stark’s best tech couldn’t accomplish it, then Bucky wants to doubt they can.

Voices outside distract Bucky from the spiraling thoughts. He quickly puts the lid back on the filing box and slips it back into the bottom of the stack. He stands, half hidden behind the filing cabinets and looks towards the door, hoping no one is coming inside.

He can’t make out any words, the heavy wood muffling and garbling the voices, but he surprisingly recognizes Howard’s voice passing the door. And then Peggy speaks.

Shit. Shit. Shit. Bucky ducks fully behind the shelf, even though Peggy is still in the hallway on the other side of the door. This is why he only hears the doorknob being turned, but doesn’t know who has entered the room.

“Wait, I didn’t have to put in my code,” Peggy says, perplexed.

There is a beat of silence. “Something’s wrong,” Howard says. One set of footsteps repeat. “I need to check my office.”

Bucky doesn't dare to breathe as he hears Peggy's heels click twice on the floor. She seems to be hovering by the door, on the far side of four rows of filing cabinets. Then he hears the click of her taking the safety off her gun.

Bucky freezes every muscle, locking his body into sniper mode. He can sit for hours in this exact position. He will not move until Peggy leaves the room. He can't hear her anymore, but his mind conjures a brunette woman walking on just the balls of her feet so that her heels don't click, handgun held down at her side as she stalks into the room.

And then an alarm goes off. Bucky darts from his hiding place, rolling across the aisle between two filing cabinets. Peggy wasn't in it. He freezes, crouched at an end cap. There's no way Peggy's unenhanced ears could have heard him over the blaring alarm, but in the way he can sense how she is moving in the room without seeing her, he thinks she can do the same to him. Bucky rolls across the next aisle. Still no Peggy.

Then he turns and a gun is in his face. Bucky can't remember the last time someone got the jump on the Asset, if ever. He looks into the depths of the barrel, then up and into the eyes of the woman who holds it. Peggy.

"Hey," he finds himself saying with a half smile. It feels right, like it's from a memory.

Peggy is frozen, just a twitch in her face. Then, "Bucky?" Her hand holding the gun waivers.

Fast as lightning, Bucky raises his metal hand and covers the barrel of the gun with his palm. He feels the impact as she fires a bullet. Then he grips, digging his indestructible fingers into the metal and yanking. He out muscles Peggy and throws the gun into an unknown corner before sweeping his legs out to knock her own out from under her. It's easy because of her heels--she's unable to catch her balance--and Bucky uses the opportunity to dart for the door.

In the hallway, emergency lights are flashing and a small group of people have gathered. They obviously heard the gunshot and are all

turned towards the doorway. Bucky looks at them, blocking the way to the stairwell he used to reach this floor, and runs the other direction. They pursue.

At the other end of the hallway, near Stark's office if Bucky remembers the blue prints correctly, is the elevator. He digs his fingers into the crack and rips it open, looking down the open shaft. The elevator must be far below, perhaps locked from moving due to the building being on high alert. Bucky jumps.

He has leapt from more extreme heights before, but it always has consequences. When he sees the elevator approaching, alarmingly fast, Bucky slaps his metal hand against the glass, looking for purchase. A beam in the glass passes and he catches it on the end of his fingers. The arm takes most of his body weight, stopping his free fall momentum and throwing his hat from his head. The small amount of impact that reaches his shoulder feels like it's ripping sinew from bone however, and he screams through his teeth from the pain. Bucky swings his other arm to the beam and hangs for a moment, trying to catch some breath. Then he drops to the roof of the elevator.

The irony of the situation then hits him and he laughs along with the ringing sirens. At least this time an other dimensional being won't materialize in the elevator. Instead of entering it, he rips open the doors on the level before him and rolls into the hallway of S.H.I.E.L.D.'s third floor.

People immediately notice him, but he darts between them, causing surprised shouts and walkie-talkie calls for security and backup. Bucky is already at the stairwell however, and leaps the two floors down before tumbling into the main lobby. He sprints towards the doors but movement on his right catches his attention. He uses an eagle sculpture as cover as a hail of bullets follows his movement. As he briefly waits for it to subside, he plans his sprint to the doors. There is a person he can use as cover, but does he risk someone getting caught in the crossfire? Does he take a hostage?

Belatedly, he realizes if he was really going to use a hostage to leave safely, it should have been Peggy. She is one of the most valuable people in this building and every employee would hesitate to shoot.

He shakes the thought from his mind. Planting his feet to sprint, he charts a course from the sculpture to the security scanners and then to the front doors. Bucky takes off at a sprint.

Bullets follow his path, but they can't risk shooting into the crowd. It's clearing the longer Bucky runs, however, and offering less cover. He reaches the security scanners and realizes everyone has rushed to the edges of the room, away from the obvious intruder. Bucky was meant to get in and out without drawing much attention; so much for that plan.

The next sprint, no matter how he plans it after appearing from behind the x-ray machine, will be empty of cover. The risk of taking a bullet is huge. He will have to get creative. Digging his metal fingers into the side of the machine's belt, he removes a flat piece of metal. It immediately startles a memory into his mind, an image of Steve tucking his new bulk behind a metal saucer flying across Bucky's vision. *Not now, memories* .

Bucky looks away from the metal in his hand and the memories dissipate. His eyes lock on the front door, where safety waits, and he makes his final run for the exit.

The metal covers from his ankles to mid shoulder. Bucky ducks his head, hiding part of his face behind the upper edge as he sprints. It's risky, he's exposed, and he pays the price. A bullet grazes his temple. The impact knocks him off course and he slows to orient himself despite the stinging across his forehead and the blood already running into his eyes. The long pieces of hair hanging loose from his bun turn red and stick to the side of his face. And then he's out the door.

He blinks in the sun, letting his pupils shrink, then takes off for the nearest car. "Get out," he tells the driver, dropping the metal shield and pulling his gun from the where it has been tucked at the small of his back. "Out!"

The man puts up his hands and slithers out of the car and past Bucky. He throws himself into the driver's seat and hits the gas before he has even shifted into drive. The car tires shriek against the pavement as Bucky careens across the Potomac.

11. Open Ocean

Eleven is staring at the colorful cube, turning the sides this way and that with her mind, when she hears the car. She peeks out the small plane window, but can't see the driver through the tinted windshield. She ducks low, in case it isn't Bucky, and watches.

The car door cracks, but doesn't open all the way. Then, fingers appear over the top of the door, gripping the window frame and leaving a dent. Eleven sighs in relief. It is Bucky. It takes him a beat to fully appear, using the car door to right himself and warping the metal of the sedan. Something's not right.

Eleven hurries to the door of the plane and presses the button for the mechanism that lowers the stairs. Bucky walks slowly towards them and Eleven steps down the stairs, meeting him halfway.

"Okay?" she asks.

"I will be" Bucky grunts. Eleven can see a red stain down the side of his face, blood dried to his skin and caked in his hair.

"What...is wrong?" Eleven has been learning fuller sentences from Bucky, as well as new words everyday but still struggles with knowing if she is really putting them together correctly. However, Bucky always seems to understand.

"I took a bullet across my head," Bucky says, motioning to his face as he takes the steps slowly. Eleven backs up them as he progresses. "And I got lightheaded halfway here while being in a car chase."

"Chase?"

"People were after me."

"What did you... do?"

Bucky sighs as he gets to the top of the steps. "I stole information. And saw an old friend."

"Friend?" Eleven asks.

“Yes,” Bucky replies, settling heavily into the first seat of the plane and motioning for Eleven to hit the switch to close the stairs. “People I know, people I used to talk to.”

“Like Steve?” Eleven asks.

Bucky furrows his brow. “Not... quite. There are people who are your friends and then there are some people who are... more than friends.”

“Steve is a... more friend?” Eleven asks, trying to wrap her head around all the kinds of people.

“Yes,” Bucky says, a smile playing at his lips. “Steve was the *most* friend.”

Bucky just sits in the plane for over an hour, eyes closed and feeling his skin knitting back together. There is still a subtle ache in his shoulder from the fall in the elevator, but he knows this is healing too. Mostly, he needs to wait for his body to create more blood. He supposes the head wound had bled so much it weakened him, especially since he hadn't even put pressure on it while driving. He hates being dizzy; it reminds him too much of the fog after being in the chair. He knows they should leave, fly the plane somewhere far from D.C. for the time being, but he doesn't want to try to take off while light headed. And he just wants to sit for a moment too. He can't wait to just *relax* someday.

“Bucky?” He opens his eyes at Eleven's voice. “Do you need...?” She holds out a towel from the little onboard bathroom, wet from the sink.

“Thank you,” Bucky says, taking it from her and beginning to wipe at his face. The towel is white, and he is discovering *just* how much blood he has caked on his skin. It's alarming watching the fabric turn pink.

Bucky's hair is not as easily cleaned, however, and he searches the plane for a hat to cover it. They have a bathroom onboard, but no shower and Bucky thinks they will need one soon. He can't just let a child not have access to a shower, and he will start drawing attention in public now that he will smell of blood and not just sweat.

"What now?" Eleven asks Bucky after he has made them food. Dinner is microwaved Ramen, one cup for Eleven and two for Bucky. They sit beside one another in the cockpit, Eleven with her legs crossed on the seat and a blanket over her shoulders.

"Now, I use these maps," Bucky says, motioning to the stolen files he has laid out on the dashboard, "and we find Steve."

Eleven looks at the maps, and Bucky wonders for a moment if she does know Steve's exact location. It's hard to know how her mind works when she can't truly articulate everything she wants to. But they are working on it.

"We fly?"

"Well," Bucky says, "I think we use a boat." Eleven looks at him blankly. "Boats are vehicles, like a plane or a car," he explains, "but they go on water."

"On the ocean," Eleven says.

"Yes, on the ocean where Steve is." She nods. "So we need a boat."

"Need...a boat."

"And I think we are going to get one in New York." Bucky has told Eleven about New York, told her some stories about Steve and his antics before the war to kill time while they fly.

"Your home?"

Bucky thinks. Is it his home anymore? "Hopefully."

Eleven doesn't really understand how this "espionage" thing works, but she is following Bucky's lead. According to him, they have to abandon the plane, so anything she wants she needs to put into the backpack he stole her. It has turtles on it with some sort of swords and she doesn't like it much but shoves a blanket, the dolls, and three waffles into it anyways.

She watches as Bucky produces weapons he has stored in every crevice of the plane. In the cockpit alone he unearths three knives and a handgun. A sniper rifle is disassembled and tucked into a case he tosses over his shoulder. Bucky even flips a tiny, tiny switchblade between his fingers, eyes flicking to Eleven, before tucking it into his boot.

"If you can explode demons from another dimension, I highly doubt you need a knife. And I'd prefer you don't get close enough to danger to use one," he tells her. She simply nods.

Bucky takes the steps two at a time off the plane, then turns to make sure Eleven is following. She teeters down the steps, steep for her small legs, and Bucky scoops her up with his metal arm to bring her to the grass. They're in a field in upstate New York, not far from a teeming farm town where Bucky says he will "hotwire a car." Eleven hadn't asked what this meant.

Eleven can barely keep up with Bucky's walking pace, his sure footed assassin's march too fast for a tiring kid. She ends up on his shoulders again, his flesh hand resting on her bony knee so she doesn't tip backwards. Bucky thinks they must be a comical sight: a broad assassin still wearing all kevlar and combat gear with a small girl on his shoulders in an oversized tourist shirt he had stolen her and jean shorts.

They come across a country gas station soon enough and Bucky easily

hot wires a car parked behind the building. Eleven climbs into the backseat, setting her small backpack beside her while Bucky throws his gear into the back of the SUV before slipping into the driver's seat.

"Buckle," he tells Eleven quickly when he turns around, quickly backing the car out of the space and turning onto the side road. They travel away from the station, never putting the stolen car in view of the station windows, and take a country highway past decadent farm homes.

Just as they enter the city, Bucky checks the backseat. Eleven has been characteristically quiet which means Bucky never knows what she is thinking or doing. His quick glance reveals her asleep, still buckled but fallen to the side so her head is pillowed on the middle seat.

Bucky circumvents the city itself, well aware it could trigger any number of time consuming memories for him, and drives them into a coastal town. They park by the shore, where boats are docked along the white piers. Speed boats, pontoons, and yachts all sit bobbing in the surf. Bucky takes off his kevlar and throws it into the backseat, feeling itchy without it, like he is too exposed. Then he leaves the car and takes Eleven's hand to walk down the pier, just a smelly father and daughter sightseeing.

They will have to go far out to sea, so the bigger the boat the better. The speed boats, even the massive ones for deep sea fishing, won't suffice. They need living space too, shelter for the elements should they encounter rainstorms. They head deeper into the marina and that's where he sees the yacht. A woman's name is painted on it in big, green cursive letters and it screams quality. Bucky doubts a storm could take this boat out. Bucky also doubts it will be easy to steal.

"Let's go," he tells Eleven, turning them around.

They book a room overlooking the marina at the small bed and breakfast at the water's edge. Bucky goes to the small shops on the town square and buys them both new clothes and proper toiletries so they can blend into the area. Eleven skeptically looks at the girl's

sundress he hands her, but does take delight in how comfortable it is once she puts it on. Bucky feels equally dismayed at the prospect of wearing a brightly colored shorts and a button up shirt, but dons them anyways and is careful to keep his metal hand in his green pocket.

Two days of reconnaissance quickly reveal the owner of the craft. A captain arrives in the early evening on Friday, readying the boat for departure. After dinner, a group arrives. They seem to already be a few drinks in--loud and boisterous as they walk down the dock--and immediately continue partying once on the boat. Bucky watches them leave the marina through his binoculars in the bed and breakfast window (they'd paid more for an ocean view). He carefully noted that the captain, not the owner, was the one who carried the keys.

Eleven has been discovering cable television while Bucky sits fixedly at the window. She has discovered the source of her backpack's characters and is quickly becoming a fan of *Alvin and the Chipmunks* when Bucky jumps from his seat.

"Stay here," he tells her. It's nothing she hasn't heard before and she knows he will be back. She is, however, bored enough to creep to the window after the hotel room door has clicked shut behind him and watch what is happening in the marina.

A group of men and women, elegantly dressed but looking worse for wear, are wandering in from the big boat Bucky had eyed upon their arrival. Bucky, wearing his new clothes, pads down the dock. As he passes the captain, they bump arms and knock one another off balance on the slippery wood. Bucky reaches out a hand, steadying the other man. Meanwhile, Eleven watches his metal hand snag something from the man's pocket. It's so fast the metal is but a blur. Anyone else witnessing from their hotel room wouldn't be suspicious. Eleven only knew what happened because she knows Bucky.

They talk and nod at one another for a moment, assurances that they

are quite alert, and no, *I'm* sorry. Then they part ways, Bucky continuing his fake path into the marina.

After he is out of sight, Eleven looks for the yacht goers, but they have left too. She goes back to her spot sitting in the middle of the queen sized bed and turns the television back on.

Ten minutes pass before she hears a key in the lock. It quickly opens and Bucky strodes inside. "What are you doing?" he asks. "We've got a boat to catch."

The ocean makes Eleven nervous, and she spends the first day on the water inside the bedroom, where only two porthole windows show the lack of land. Bucky doesn't blame her considering he doesn't know if she can swim. After this realization, he asks her to wear a lifevest when she is comfortable enough to be on the deck. However, she shoots him a glare that would kill if looks could. He supposes she will save herself with her telekinesis if she is drowning.

Bucky has the maps spread across the cockpit, navigating by the large compass set into the wall above the steering wheel and paper trails. It takes days to reach a viable section of ocean and hours to decide how to discover if Steve is around. Eleven, voice somber, simply tells Bucky "I'll know." He accepts her words without question. If she has gotten him this far, he will follow her abilities anywhere.

Once she is more comfortable on deck, Bucky finds her at the back railing. Dolphins have taken to playing in their wake, jumping out of the water and over the white crests of the disturbed water. Eleven thinks they are extraordinary and Bucky agrees.

The fourth day brings a rainstorm, confining them to the cabin and cockpit. There is a lavish living space, where Bucky has placed all the alcohol out of reach of Eleven, although if she really did want it she could just float it down from the shelves. A thin stairwell leads to the cockpit and a bedroom. Bucky hasn't slept much, too scared to let the

boat drift while he rests, but he has caught a few naps on the king size bed. More often, Eleven curls in the center of it like a large cat.

They also take advantage of the shower and jacuzzi tub in the large bathroom of the bedroom. They had both bathed at the bed and breakfast, but it's nothing compared to the rain shower head or bubbling jacuzzi. Bucky isn't sure who the owner of this yacht is, but damn he is glad they have a lot of money.

After the storm has passed, Bucky continues sailing. They look for Steve constantly, Eleven always feeling for his presence. Bucky doesn't let the silence dampen his hope.

12. The Deep Blue

Eleven feels it like a tug on her mind, a string pulling her attention to their right.

She slowly raises her hand, one finger extended, as she turns to look at Bucky at the boat's steering wheel.

"That way," she says, barely louder than the rumbling engine and wind against the windshield.

Bucky begins turning the wheel even as he asks "Are you sure?"

"Yes."

They travel in silence for the next hour, Eleven paying rapt attention to their whereabouts. Bucky switches between watching her and watching the water ahead. It is a thankfully calm day, and the waves are small. Their travel is significantly easier than yesterday.

In a nondescript patch of ocean, exactly identical to the last hundred miles of blue and white crested surf, Eleven tells Bucky to stop the boat. He eases it to a halt, the yacht just bobbing above the fish.

"According to my navigation," Bucky says, "we are near an oceanic trench."

Eleven pokes out with her mind, feeling the consciousness of the teaming ocean life. A school of tuna are several dozen meters beneath the water's surface. Further down is more fish wandering through the blue, and then below is a drop off. Eleven can't tell how deep, her consciousness not easily finding life signaling the bottom. This is where the string is pulling, her mind itching to dive deep beneath the surface.

"He's here."

Bucky takes a deep breath. "How do you know?"

Eleven shrugs. "I can just... feel him."

Bucky leaves the boat's cockpit and Eleven follows. They pass through the cabin, cluttered by Bucky's weapons and their general disarray in this temporary home. At the back of the boat, Bucky opens a wardrobe to reveal wetsuits and snorkeling gear. He changes and Eleven realizes his intentions.

"Too deep," she tells him.

Bucky just looks at her. "You got a better plan?"

She doesn't know how to tell him it's impossible to dive that far. The deeper she had pushed her consciousness, the more it had become apparent the pressure is too great for the average person there. Plus, she is assuming Bucky can't hold his breath for hours on end.

"Wait." Eleven moves to the boat's railing, staring down into the waves lapping at the yacht's hull. She closes her eyes, focusing on plunging her consciousness and senses down into the water. She imagines swimming down like the dolphins who had swam behind the boat, playing in the wake. She senses the sides of the trench and digs deeper, parting the water and carrying forwards. It strains her consciousness, and she loses the grasp.

"I can do it," she tells Bucky, "but I need a bath."

"A bath? Like a shower?" he asks.

She shakes her head. "No, a space for... silence. How we talked... before."

"A bath?"

"It's full of water and... not cold. Or warm. And... I float."

Bucky nods, now understanding. "A sensory deprivation tank."

Eleven doesn't know what this is, but she thinks he is on the right track.

It's fucking lucky they are in the ocean. Bucky gathers buckets of ocean water and carries them to the jacuzzi off the bedroom. They are also lucky they scored such a fancy yacht which actually has a jacuzzi.

He dumps bucket after bucket, scooping from the back swim deck of the boat. Eleven runs the water from the jacuzzi's tap, adding hot to the frigid ocean water to attempt to match her own body temperature. It's a slow process, but if this is what she needs to retrieve Steve, Bucky would do it a hundred times over.

Finally, the jacuzzi is full. Bucky stands back, hands on his hips, to admire their work.

"Do you think it's good?" he asks, nodding at the bath.

Eleven is wearing a men's black shirt found in the wardrobe as a dress for in the bath. It is almost to her ankles and she looks tinier than ever with it hanging from her thin shoulders.

"Yes." She takes the steps into the water, settling so her shoulders are submerged and then moving to lie on her back.

"Should I be here or...?" Bucky asks.

"Outside. To get Steve when he's up." Bucky takes a moment to think what this means and assumes he needs to get Steve out of the water once Eleven does... whatever she is going to do. Bucky still isn't totally sure, the language between them a slight barrier as always.

"Okay, okay. Yell if you need me." He heads down the stairs and onto the deck, facing the direction Eleven had when she had first inspected the ocean after they had stopped the yacht. The wind moves his hair, brushing it along his shoulder. He feels uneasy being out of his kevlar. Bucky had only taken it off in the coastal town and to bathe, the weight of the protective materials a safety blanket. But out here on the ocean, he reminds himself there isn't other humans for miles upon miles. He's fine. He's safe. He almost has Steve.

Minutes pass. Bucky wonders if he should check on Eleven. Is

something supposed to be happening? He isn't sure.

Bucky closes his eyes a moment, just simply smelling the salt on the breeze. He can barely believe he is here, the closest he has been to Steve in thirty years. He's free. He's alive. It's all a miracle of the most unique kind.

A bubbling noise draws Bucky's attention. He snaps open his eyes and watches as the surface of the water is disturbed, something pressing up from beneath. He spots fish scattering beneath the surface and seaweed is tossed in the disturbance, like rafts in the rapids. Something large and dark is approaching from beneath the water.

Suddenly, a steel gray piece of metal breaks the surface, salt water clinging to the planes of the material and dripping from the lofty point back into the ocean. Bucky watches in amazement as more and more of the metal is revealed until it becomes apparent he is looking at the wing of a plane, warped and discolored by years underwater. Slowly, a windshield comes into view, paneled in reflective glass across the entire nose of the vessel. This must be the Valkyrie.

Bucky itches to jump in the water, throw his mass over the yacht's railing and begin searching the wreck. However, he knows the water will suck him down if the plane is still moving to the surface, the displaced water like a downward riptide. He anxiously waits, hands gripping the railing until his flesh knuckles turn white.

Finally, *finally*, the plane is still, floating at the surface of the water. Bucky fits the snorkel mask over his eyes and situates the mouthpiece in his lips, then dives off the side of the yacht.

The water is cold, even through the wet suit. Bucky can't imagine the horror of Steve crashing the plane into these waves, the sensation as he drowned and froze. Bucky still doesn't understand how Steve is alive, but won't question it either.

One lap around the plane, face below the water's surface, reveals a hole ripped in the back left side of the plane's body. Bucky takes one last breath at the surface of the ocean, then dives for the entrance.

The plane is incredibly dark, no windows in this back room. Bucky

feels along the walls, pulling himself through the plane with beams and seams in the metal rather than actual swimming. To the best of his abilities, he is heading towards the nose of the plane. Bucky assumes Steve is behind the mirrored windshield, having tried to cancel the autopilot feature until the last possible second.

Bucky floats through a doorway and finally there is light. The outside sun filters through the windshield, even more staggeringly wide from the inside, to illuminate the spacious cockpit. Metal walkways make their way around the sides of the space with ice clinging, the deep ocean cold enough to adhere itself to the plane. A stand in the middle of the room appears to have once born something precious. However, Bucky only has eyes for the pilot's seat. He zeroes in on a snippet of golden hair he can see past the high back.

Kicking his feet, he propels himself across the cockpit and grabs the back of the chair, pulling himself over it to spin and float down in front of Steve. He takes a selfish moment to just look at the person he has missed most in his life. Steve's eyes are gently closed, like he is sleeping. His eyelashes brush his cheekbones how Bucky loves. Even with skin so pale he could be ice himself, the pink tone leached from his lips, Steve is beautiful. His navy Captain America uniform is nearly black from the water, but the white star on his chest seems to glow in the sunlight from outside.

God, how had Bucky survived this last month without him? How had he survived the last thirty years without him? Even without remembering who Steve was, Bucky feels there was a hole in his chest the right size for Steve to reach between his ribs and touch his heart.

Bucky then focuses on the ice freezing Steve to the seat. He grips one arm of the chair, just beside Steve's own hand, and draws back his metal fist. Between pulling himself towards the chair and his own movement against the resistance of the water, Bucky is able to punch the ice hard enough to splinter it into shards of glass. The pieces float away into the darkness of the ship and Bucky, desperate for air, grips Steve under the arms and pushes his body towards the door.

Thankfully, a subtle current is running through the plane towards the hole in the hull. Bucky swims along, following the dark shape of

Steve's body floating its way out of the plane. By the time they reach the hole, Bucky thinks he is close to passing out. He frantically paddles to the surface, his metal hand gripping the shoulder of Steve's uniform to pull him with. They break the surface of the water and Bucky throws off the scuba mask to suck in air. His lungs expand deeply, relief flooding through him. Beside him, Steve remains unconscious but even more relief floods Bucky's blood when he turns and looks at Steve bobbing in the water.

After he has regained his breath, Bucky paddles back to the boat, his arm wrapped across Steve's chest protectively. It's slow, swimming with only one arm. As soon as Bucky reaches the swim deck and has Steve and his own body out of the water, the Valkyrie begins to sink back into the ocean. Bucky realizes, with a start, that Eleven was holding it at the surface throughout his swim.

Bucky's teeth chatter as he pushes his wet hair out of his face to look down at Steve. He brushes a finger across his cheek, marveling, before he scoops Steve into his arms. It's the only time Bucky has carried Steve like this, legs over one arm and shoulders against the other, in his newer body. They go sideways up the narrow yacht stairs and into the bedroom, where Bucky sets Steve on the bed, waterlogged clothes and all, before going into the bathroom to check on Eleven.

She is sitting on the edge of the bath, sopping wet like the rest of them. The water in the bath has a red tint, and Bucky sees where her nose is still bleeding, as well as her ears and eyes.

Eleven looks almost sheepish, like she has done something wrong. Bucky takes the hand towel off the rack by the sink and kneels before Eleven, carefully wiping away the blood.

"Thank you," Bucky tells her once she is clean. He settles back onto his haunches, putting the towel in his lap and putting his hands on Eleven's knobby knees. "This wouldn't be possible without you."

"Steve is here?"

"Yes," Bucky assures her, a genuine smile pushing its way onto his face. It's the first time he can remember feeling his muscles move like

this. “Yes, we have Steve.”

Eleven smiles back.

Notes for the Chapter:

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13. Epilogue

It's a Saturday during a New York winter. Snow drapes every available surface, save for the roads and sidewalks where passing cars and trodding feet have turned it to slush. Lights are wrapped around each lamppost, twirling their way to the tops, and Christmas trees shine from nearly every apartment window.

On the streets, people are bundled head to foot. Scarves drape across their faces and hats are pulled tight over their ears. They stuff their hands into their pockets or slip on gloves before even leaving buildings. Above, clouds gather for an evening snow shower.

On Union Avenue is a family, two men and an androgynous daughter walking three across the sidewalk. They stop to marvel at the lights and holiday displays in the windows. Each holds one of their daughter's hands, snug inside green mittens.

"We should get hot cocoa," the blonde man observes, holding one gloved hand to his face and breathing into it to warm his frigid lips.

"I can warm those for you," the other man says slyly.

"Hot cocoa!" the daughter says, wiggling in excitement.

The blonde looks down at her. "Well, that's settled."

The brunette man laughs, tucking a strand of hair back into his beanie. "You give in too easily."

"Can't ever stop giving her the world," the blonde sing-songs. They continue down the sidewalk, only stopping when the first flakes of the day's snow begin to fall.

"Look, Eleven," the brunette says. "Try to catch one on your tongue."

The blonde lifts her into the air, putting her on his shoulders so she can reach for the flakes. They continue on, the girl focused on eating a snowflake. Just as they reach a tiny cafe, she raises her hands in victory.

“Did you get one?” the brunette asks. She nods vigorously.

The blonde sets her back on the ground to go into the cafe, still intent on hot cocoa. The brunette holds the door for the other two, his eyes like hearts as he watches his family walk into the warmth.

Notes for the Chapter:

This was such a joy to write! Come visit us on
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